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ABSTRACT

Data and analysis presented in this paper demonstrates the changing dynamics of governing the average size of households in the United States. Although the average size of households in the United States fell steadily throughout the 1970s, the relative weight of the forces leading to smaller households shifted over the decade. During the first half of the decade, decreases in the size of family households were responsible for the bulk of the decrease in average household size. During the second half of the decade, decreases in the proportion of married-couple households began to exert a greater impact on the downward trend in the size of households. The slower rate of decline in household size observed during the first half of the 1980s represents a continuation of these trends. The living arrangements of adults, more than decreasing fertility, seem to be exerting an increasing impact on the average size of households. (Author/KH)

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CHANGE IN THE STRUCTURE AND SIZE OF AMERICAN HOUSEHOLDS: 1970 TO 1985

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Abstract

Although the average size of households in the United States fell steadily throughout the 1970's, the relative weight of the forces leading to smaller households shifted over the decade. During the first half of the decade, decreases in the size of family households were responsible for the bulk of the decrease in average household size. During the second half of the decade, decreases in the proportion of married-couple households began to exert a greater impact on the downward trend in the size of households. The slower rate of decline in household size observed during the first half of the 1980's represents a continuation of these trends, according to which the living arrangements of adults seem to be exerting an increasing impact on the average size of households.

CHANGE IN THE STRUCTURE AND SIZE OF AMERICAN HOUSEHOLDS:
1970 TO 1985

One of the major long-term trends observed among modern societies is a ubiquitous decline in the average size of households. This trend has often been attributed to putative changes in family structure which accompany industrialization, most notably, a shift from extended to nuclear family forms. More recent scholarship, however, has called into question the pervasiveness of the extended family form in preindustrial societies (Levy, 1965; Laslett, 1972), and has tended to emphasize the impact of declining rates of fertility and mortality on the sizes of basically invariant nuclear family structures.

The historical record of the United States provides a clear illustration of the long-term trend toward smaller households. The average size of American households decreased from 5.79 persons in 1790 to an historic low of 2.75 persons as of the 1980 Census (Sweet and Bumpass, 1986). Against the backdrop of this secular decline, however, are periodic ebbs and flows in the rate of decline. The data in Figure 1 illustrate these fluctuations for the U.S. over the period, 1940 to 1985. Household size declined sharply during the

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

1940's and levelled off with the onset of the post-war baby boom. By the mid-1960's, the decrease in the size of households had resumed, continuing until 1981, at which point the rate of decline appears to have slowed again.

The present research is concerned with these more recent changes in the average size of households in the United States. The period of interest is the decade and a half from 1970 to 1985, an interval which we have seen includes both a dramatic decline and a later levelling off of household size.

Despite the growing literature on the demography of the household and the family (see the review articles by Sweet; 1977 and Burch; 1979), relatively little attention has been directed to changes in the size of households, per se. And such research that has been done tends to focus on one or another particular aspect of these changes rather than surveying the entire landscape of all households. Kobrin (1976), for example, emphasizes the contribution of increasing numbers of small, non-family households to the aggregate fall in household size observed since the 1950's. Treas (1981), on the other hand, demonstrates the importance of decreasing fertility for recent declines in the size of family households. While each of these articles calls our attention to an important aspect of change in American households, the relative contribution of each development to the overall decline in household size remains unclear.

Perhaps the most comprehensive attempt to deal with long-run changes in the size of American households is the work of Kuznets (1978). In this article, the author sets forth a general framework for the comparative study of household size, according to which the size of households is viewed as a function of two analytically distinct factors. The first of these, the "jointness or apartness of adults" (JAA) factor, refers to the extent to which adults form their own households as opposed to sharing living arrangements with other

adults. The second factor, the "natural increase-children" (NIC) component, is concerned with the contribution of children to the size of households. Operationally, Kuznets implemented this distinction by breaking down overall "persons per household" figures by age, with persons less than 15 years of age representing the NIC factor and persons 15 years of age or older indicating the JAA factor.

Kuznets applied this framework to a variety of comparative contexts; cross-nationally, among countries and regions at different developmental stages and, most relevant to our own interests, across time within the United States. Reviewing the data from 1790 to 1970, Kuznets concludes that the natural increase factor has become less important over time, while the jointness or apartness of adults factor has become increasingly important.

This conclusion would appear to vindicate Kobrin's (1976) emphasis on the importance of increases in non-family households to recent declines in the size of American households. One wonders, however, whether the conclusion would stand for the more recent period with which we are concerned. Evidence presented by Treas (1981) indicates that the impact of fertility decreases on the size of family households was particularly strong in the decade from 1968 to 1978.

A common theme running through the three works cited above is that aggregate-level changes in the average size of households may be a function of changes both in the types of households which are formed (which have to do primarily with the living arrangements of adults) and in the type-specific sizes of households (which are affected primarily by fertility patterns). An assessment of the relative

contribution of each type of change to the overall decline in household size is the primary goal of this research. In contrast to previous research, the present work will attempt to deal with all households by means of a household typology which makes explicit reference to the living arrangements of adults.

Aggregate-Level Changes in Household Structure and Size

Table 1 presents distributions of households by type for the years, 1970, 1975, 1980 and 1985. (The data in this table and the following table are taken from the March Current Population Surveys for those years; the corresponding Current Population Reports are U.S. Bureau of the Census; 1971, 1976, 1981 and 1985). This particular

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

household typology classifies all households in terms of the sex and marital status of the householder and the presence or absence of related family members (who are, for the most part, spouses and/or children) (Burch, 1967). The identification of households which contain married couples captures a significant dimension of Kuznets' "jointness or apartness of adults" factor, while non-family households correspond to the "primary individuals" within Kobrin's framework. This typology thus addresses the major components in the debate about the significance of changes in the living arrangements of adults for recent changes in household size.

The data in Table 1 reveal dramatic changes in the relative frequency of the various types of households over the 15-year period. Married-couple family households decreased by almost 13%. Offsetting this decrease are increases in the proportions of non-family

households and female-headed family households. A sizeable literature has emerged to account for these changes in the structure of American households, emphasizing the significance of increases in the age at first marriage, increases in rates of marital disruption and increases in rates of illegitimate births (Ross and Sawhill, 1975; Cherlin, 1981; Espenshade, 1985; Rodgers and Thornton, 1985; Smith and Cutright, 1985).

It should be noted, however, that the major portion of these changes occurred during the 1970's. From 1980 to 1985, the rates of these changes appear to have diminished appreciably.

The data in Table 2 reveal how the sizes of these various types of households have changed during the period under consideration. Not only were the 1970's a decade of dramatic change in the distribution

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

of households by type, but type-specific sizes were themselves changing in significant ways. All family households decreased in size over the decade, with the greatest decreases occurring among married-couple families. As Treas (1981) has indicated, these decreases in the size of families reflect the cumulative impact of recent declines in fertility, which began in the early 1960's and continued on into the mid-1970's. On the other hand, the size of non-family households increased over this ten-year period, with the greatest increases occuring among male-headed non-family households. These increases in the size of non-family households reflect increases in cohabitation (Sweet, 1979) as well as a tendency for males to be reported as "householders" in such households (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1985).

Just as rates of structural change appear to have diminished since 1980, so also have rates of change in type-specific household sizes. Married-couple and female-headed family households registered further slight decreases in size from 1980 to 1985, while male-headed households (of both the family and non-family variety) showed slight increases. The slowed rate of decline among family households reflects the levelling off of fertility rates which occured in the mid-1970's. The increasing size of male-headed family households may indicate changing patterns of child custody following divorce, while larger male-headed non-family households reflects a continuation of trends toward increasing cohabitation (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1985).

Decomposing Change in Average Household Size

We have seen that the 1970's brought about dramatic changes both in the proportion and size of married-couple family households. By 1980, such households were relatively fewer in number, and those that were, were smaller. At the same time, female-headed family households were increasing as a proportion of all households, although the average size of these units was decreasing. This was also a decade of growth in the proportion of non-family households, whose sizes were increasing slightly. The net effect of these various changes was a sharp decrease in the average size of households.

During the first half of the 1980's, these changes have become greatly attenuated. Both the proportion and size of married- couple households have continued to decline, although at much slower rates than in the preceding decade. As a result, the rate of decline in the

average size of households appears to have slowed as well.

In the present section, we attempt to bring these various changes together in a more systematic decomposition of overall changes in household size over the 15-year period. To achieve this goal, the data in Table 2 were subjected to a weighted regression analysis in which the dependent variable was average household size and the various cell means were weighted by their sample frequencies. These weights were roughly proportional to the percentages in Table 1, and thus had the effect of insuring that the changes in the distribution of households by type revealed in that table were taken into account in the regression analysis. The independent variables, year and household type, were entered into the analysis as dummy variables. The results of the analysis are displayed in Table 3.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

In Model 1, average household size is regressed on the year variables alone. The constant term of this model represents average household size in 1970, and the year coefficients represent gross year-to-year changes in this quantity (i.e., the column marginal in Table 2). In Model 2, average household size is expressed as a function of both year and household type. This model allows the distribution of households by type to vary from year to year and posits a constant set of "type effects" across the 15-year period. That this model accounts for 99.5% of the variation between cell means in Table 2 suggests that differential change in household size across types of households is negligible.

But what is of particular interest in Table 3 is the effect of the introduction of the "type effects" on the year coefficients. The rightmost column of this table gives the percent reductions in the magnitudes of the year coefficients, which are interpretable as the proportions of the gross year-to-year declines in household size which are attributable to changes in the distribution of households by type, or the "jointness or apartness of adults" factor. We observe that during the 15-year period under consideration, the relative significance of this factor was increasing, in a way that Kobrin asserted but never demonstrated. However, the contribution of decreases in type-specific household sizes (particularly among family households) was by no means negligible, particularly during the first half of the 1970's.

Conclusion

The data and analysis presented in this paper have demonstrated the changing dynamics of recent changes in the average size of households in the United States. Although household size fell steadily throughout the 1970's, the relative weight of the forces leading to smaller households shifted over the decade. In the first half of the 1970's, changes in type-specific household size, attributable to the cumulative impact of fertility declines beginning in the early 1960's, were responsible for the bulk of the decrease in the average size of households. During the second half of the decade, fertility rates levelled off and changes in the living arrangements of adults began to exert a greater impact on the downward trend in the size of households. Of particular importance in this context were high levels of divorce, increasing age at first marriage and increases

in the tendency of both young and old persons to live in independent households. The slower rate of decline in household size observed during the first half of the 1980's represents a continuation of these underlying dynamics, according to which the living arrangements of adults seem to be exerting an increasing impact on the average size of households.

It would appear, then, that the post-1970 experience of change in household size constitutes a microcosmic representation of the long-run trends discussed by Kuznets (1978). Over the long haul, he argued, decreases in the average size of households have less to do with decreasing fertility and more to do with changes in the living arrangements of adults. The post-war baby boom temporarily interrupted these long-run trends, but they appear to have resumed in the decade and a half since 1970.

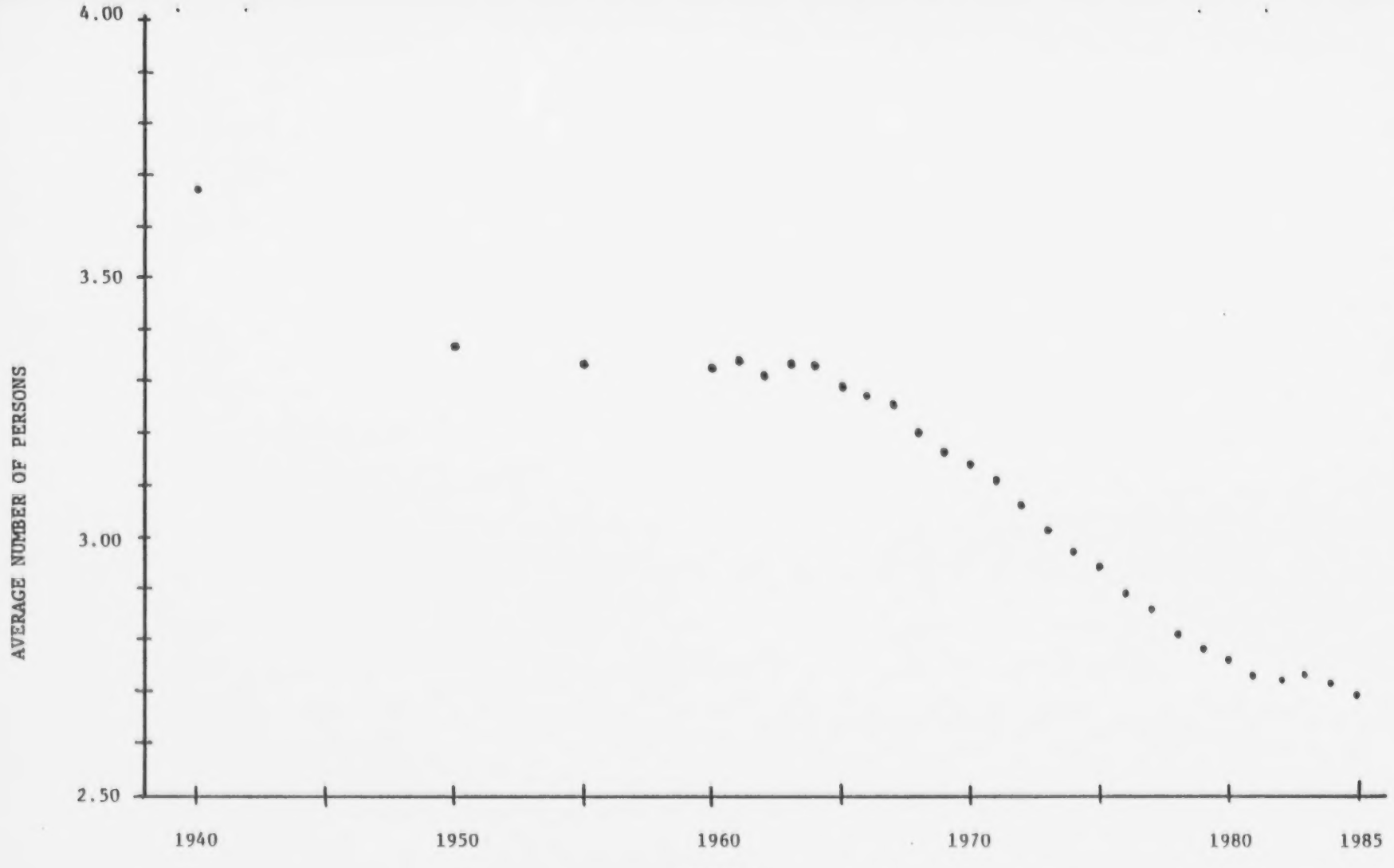

FIGURE 1:
AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD SIZE: 1940 TO 1985

SOURCE: CPR, P-20, N.402 (OCTOBER, 1985) TABLE 2

TABLE 1:

DISTRIBUTION OF HOUSEHOLDS BY TYPE: 1970, 1975, 1980 AND 1985

TYPE OF HOUSEHOLD	1970	1975	1980	1985
FAMILY				
MARRIED COUPLE	70.6	66.0	60.9	58.0
MALE-HEADED	1.9	2.1	2.2	2.6
FEMALE-HEADED	8.7	10.0	10.8	11.7
NON-FAMILY				
MALE-HEADED	6.3	8.3	10.9	11.7
FEMALE-HEADED	12.4	13.6	15.3	16.1
TOTALS	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N (000s)	62,874	71,120	79,108	86,789

TABLE 2:

AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD SIZE BY TYPE OF HOUSEHOLD:
1970, 1975, 1980 AND 1985

TYPE OF HOUSEHOLD	1970	1975	1980	1985
FAMILY				
MARRIED COUPLE	3.69	3.48	3.34	3.30
MALE-HEADED	3.05	3.03	2.91	2.99
FEMALE-HEADED	3.35	3.27	3.15	3.14
NON-FAMILY				
MALE-HEADED	1.19	1.25	1.29	1.32
FEMALE-HEADED	1.09	1.09	1.12	1.12
ALL HOUSEHOLDS	3.17	2.94	2.75	2.69

TABLE 3:

SUMMARY OF THE REGRESSION OF AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD SIZE ON HOUSEHOLD TYPE AND YEAR

INDEPENDENT VARIABLE *	UNSTANDARDIZED REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS		% REDUCTION IN YEAR EFFECT
	MODEL 1	MODEL 2	
Y70	---	---	
Y75	-0.2320	-0.1588	31.6
Y80	-0.1896	-0.0932	50.8
Y85	-0.0586	-0.0191	67.4
T1	---	2.3192	
T2	---	1.8774	
T3	---	2.1017	
T4	---	0.1812	
T5	---	---	
CONSTANT	3.1708	1.3016	
R^2 X 100	3.5	99.5	
df	3	7	

* Variables with "Y" prefixes represent year effects;
Variables with "T" prefixes represent effects of household type, such that:

T1 = Married-couple family households
T2 = Male-headed family households
T3 = Female-headed family households
T4 = Male-headed non-family households
T5 = Female-headed non-family households

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